

Globalisation of Risks and the Crisis of Democracy in Asia¹

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Books and articles discussing the crisis of democracy have been published one after another in recent years. Larry Diamond argues that democracy has been in recession since 2006.² Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt warn that democracy is under attack without even violating laws, which makes democratic recession indiscernible, and urge political actors to take action before it is too late.³ James Traub presents an even gloomier picture and argues that the state of democracy not only resembles the situation before World War I, but states are also more susceptible to totalitarianism now.⁴

Discussions on the crisis of democracy often raise the cases of Latin American countries such as Venezuela, East European countries such as Hungary and Poland, West European countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy, and Austria, and the United States. The crisis of democracy in the United States generates attention because it is a major step back from the country's indispensable roles as a symbol and supporter of the liberal international order since the end of World War II. Equally, the rise of clearly authoritarian leaders like Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela, of anti-liberal leaders like Viktor Orbán of Hungary, of authoritative political parties like Law and Justice in Poland, and of anti-EU political parties in Europe has high news value. However, the crisis of democracy is just as serious in Asia.

¹ This article was supported by JSPS Kakenhi Grant Number 18KK0338 and submitted in January 2019.

² Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015), 141-155.

³ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How democracies die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

⁴ James Traub, "Democracy Is Dying by Natural Causes," *Foreign Policy*, 1 March 2018.

Governments in Asia have interfered in the judicial sector and violated its independence. They have weakened or forced the demise of opposition parties, and have attacked and sometimes even closed down independent media outlets. They have shrunk the space available for the activities of domestic NGOs, have banned international funding for them, and have pushed international NGOs out of their countries. They have exacerbated religion-based and ethnically based discriminations. They create laws for such controls, shifting from the “rule of law,” which is one of the core tenets of democratic governance, to “rule by law” based on their political leaders’ arbitrary decisions.

Across Asia and beyond, there are three common issues behind the crisis of democracy: domestic populism, external actors’ interference with sharp power, and advances in information technology (IT). Most problematic is that all these issues expand, spread, and impact across borders. States emulate each other’s populist tactics, thereby significantly weakening democratic norms across borders. In addition, not only do external actors interfere to damage democracy in country after country, but the number of countries that use sharp power for influence is increasing. And as IT evolves, one impact is the facilitation of transborder emulation of harms to democracy both domestically and internationally. Threats to democracy are thus likely to continue to expand across borders. In this context, this article examines the challenges to democracy in Asia.

POPULISM

Populism is a political tool used to appeal to the majority to win elections, and by and large is a product of globalisation and excessive neoliberal economic policies. While the extent of economically vulnerable populations has expanded, wealth has concentrated to a fraction of economic elites, expanding economic polarisation and raising the relative poverty line. Cultural factors also have a great impact on populism. Francis Fukuyama argues that while the notion of human rights has expanded from a limited few elites to the general public over several centuries, those who face the influx of immigrants have sought ways to avoid the loss of their identity. Emulating the rights-based approach used by leftist actors, they began using identity politics to protect their rights from immigrants, Fukuyama argues.⁵ This process naturally led them to support authoritarian leaders who use xenophobic

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

rhetoric and promise to protect the majority despite resistance from traditional elites and democratic institutions.

India's governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) uses Hindu nationalism to mobilise support in this Hindu-majority country, and its populist tactics have been further escalating since BJP became the sole ruling party in the 2019 general elections. The Indian government deprived Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in India, of autonomy in September 2019, and has been preventing human rights activists and opposition party politicians from entering the region.⁶ In December 2019, the Indian government enacted the Citizenship Amendment Bill, which grants Indian citizenship only to non-Muslim illegal immigrants, accelerating the exclusion of Muslims.⁷ In Japan, the governing Liberal Democratic Party does not try to control members of its Net Supporters Club, which is estimated to have nearly 20,000 members, from spreading xenophobic narratives on the Internet.

Xenophobia is not the only tool used. Populist political leaders appeal to the weak, claiming to be the only ones who can handle problems and stressing that establishments and democratic institutions are not suitable for creating and implementing effective policies. President Duterte of the Philippines appeals to the public by asserting that drugs are the source of poverty in the country, and that he is the only one who can fight against drug dealers. The Philippine government has thus engaged in extra-judicial killings of alleged drug dealers, in numbers estimated at between 6,600 and more than 27,000 since Duterte came to the presidency in 2016.⁸ Opposition party members and human rights defenders, who criticise the drug war as being illegitimate and illegal, have been arrested. Journalists critical of the drug war are constantly threatened; a prime example is the threat to close down Rappler and the arrest of the news site's founder and editor Maria Ressa.⁹ In the 2000s, Prime Minister Thaksin of Thailand asserted that he was the only one able to fight poverty in the country, and implemented a number of policies designed to appeal to the poor, including healthcare reform and the establishment of a foundation for low-interest financing. In this effort, Thaksin curtailed criticism of his policies by using his own company, Shin Corporations, to acquire the independent iTV, and by

⁶ Jeffrey Gettleman, Suhasini Raj, Kai Schultz and Hari Kumar, "India Revokes Kashmir's Special Status, Raising Fears of Unrest," *The New York Times*, 5 August 2019.

⁷ Sumit Ganguly, "Secularism Is Dying in India," *Foreign Policy*, 11 December 2019.

⁸ Nick Cumming-Bruce, "U.N. Rights Council to Investigate Killings in Philippine Drug War," *The New York Times*, 11 July 2019.

⁹ Regine Cabato, "Philippine Journalist Maria Ressa, One of Time Magazine's 2018 People of the Year, Arrested Again," *The Washington Post*, 29 March 2019.

pressuring the business sector not to place advertisements in media that criticise the government.

Populist tactics are emulated across countries. Duterte's drug war since 2016 seems to follow Thaksin's drug war in 2003-2004, which engaged in extra-judicial killings of more than 2,000 people.¹⁰ In applying pressure against a *Tokyo Shimbun* journalist who is critical of the government, the Japanese government seems to emulate Donald Trump's obstruction of CNN journalists. The spread of populist tactics creates a new normal, seriously damaging democratic norms across borders. Facing the use of populism and the ever-exacerbating polarisation in society, people wonder if democracy itself is the problem.¹¹ When combined with the institutional hurdles impeding swift decisions in pluralistic democracies, the result is a vicious cycle leading people to support authoritarian political leaders.

SHARP POWER

While populist political elites have weakened democracy domestically, some external powers have also weakened democracy from outside. In Asia, this actor is mainly China. Different from "hard power" coercion using the military or "soft power" attraction using culture, China has been using "sharp power", the manipulation of information and impressions with deception, intimidation, and division.¹²

A typical sharp power tool is the spread of disinformation. China has been spreading disinformation in Taiwan at nearly every election as well as on other occasions, especially since the Sunflower Movement of 2014, and more so since the beginning of the Tsai Ing-wen administration in 2016.¹³ China's state-run media, government-linked Weibo accounts, the 311 Base of the People's Liberation Army, and the 61716 Unit in Fujian Province are suspected to have been conducting dis-

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Not Enough Graves: The War on Drugs, HIV/AIDS, and Violations of Human Rights," 7 July 2004.

¹¹ Thomas Carothers, "Is Democracy the Problem?" *American Interest*, 16 January 2019.

¹² For the argument on sharp power, see, for example, National Endowment for Democracy and the International Forum for Democratic Studies, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence," December 2017; Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?" *Journal of Democracy* 29, issue 3 (July 2018), 9-23.

¹³ Mitsutoyo Matsumoto, "China's Sharp Power and Taiwan" [in Japanese], *Koryu* 934 (January 2019), 20-30.

information campaigns in Taiwan.¹⁴ The scale of China's election meddling was so huge in the lead up to the presidential election in 2020 that the Taiwanese parliament passed an Anti-Infiltration Law to ban China's interference right before the presidential election.

Social media outlets are frequently used for disinformation. China has been, until recently, using domestic platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and QQ to spread disinformation. But in Hong Kong during the 2019 pro-democracy demonstration, the government began using Facebook and Twitter, which are banned in China, for disinformation. It used these channels to spread video clips and pictures to make it appear that pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong are employing violence for money, using real and American guns in demonstrations, and, in short, are uncontrollable terrorists.¹⁵ Twitter suspended 936 accounts that were disseminating such disinformation in August 2019 alone, and found that these accounts received organisational support from the Chinese government. Another 200,000 related accounts were also identified at that time.¹⁶

Social media has become a major news source in many Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand; a phenomenon that makes people even more susceptible to disinformation. In addition, people in the region use the Internet for long hours, which exposes them to disinformation at a high frequency. According to research conducted by We Are Social and Hootsuite in 2019, while the average daily Internet use in Japan was 3 hours and 45 minutes, it was 7 hours in Taiwan and India, 9 hours in Thailand, and 10 hours in the Philippines.¹⁷

Traditional media is also increasingly becoming a sharp power tool in many countries. Major media outlets in Hong Kong have been purchased by Chinese companies with links to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), subsequently changing the tone of their respective news content to pro-China. The majority stakeholder of TVB, a major television station in Hong Kong, is a member of the CCP, Li Ruigang. *South China Morning Post* was purchased in 2015 by the Alibaba Group, whose co-founder and former executive chairman, Jack Ma, is also a member of the CCP.

¹⁴ Ketty W. Chen, "China's Sharp Power and Taiwan's 9-in-1 Elections Subverting Democracy with Democratic Means," *Prospect Journal*, no. 1 (March 2019), 10-12.

¹⁵ Steven Lee Myers and Paul Mozur, "China Is Waging a Disinformation War Against Hong Kong Protesters," *New York Times*, 13 August 2019.

¹⁶ Kate Conger, "Facebook and Twitter Say China Is Spreading Disinformation in Hong Kong," *New York Times*, 19 August 2019.

¹⁷ We are Social and Hootsuite, "Digital 2019."

In 2017, i-Cable was purchased by a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.¹⁸ Tsai Eng-meng, chairman of Taiwanese snack company Want Want China, in 2008, acquired one of the major media groups of Taiwan, China Times Group, which owns newspapers such as *China Times*, *Business Times*, and *Times Weekly*, in addition to CTiTV and China Broadcasting Corporation. Tsai is reported to have been in liaison with the Chinese government, and Want Want China was reported to have received 71 million US dollars in subsidies from the Chinese government between 2017 and 2018 alone.¹⁹ In July 2019, *Apple Daily* of Taiwan reported that 23 Internet media outlets in Taiwan are functioning as propaganda stations of the Chinese government.²⁰

The Chinese government has also attempted to divide pro-democracy actors. The unrest that occurred in Mong Kok in 2016 is seen to have been fuelled by Chinese agents.²¹ In Hong Kong's District Council election in 2015, a person who tried to bribe localists to run for election to divert votes from other pro-democracy candidates was sentenced to imprisonment. A pro-China organisation, through an election campaigner of former Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying as a middleman,²² and also the CCP's United Front Work Department were found to be behind the case.²³

China has been illegally providing financial support to pro-China organisations. Pro-China candidates are noted to provide food, entertainment, and gifts regularly in their districts, with financial support from the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in Hong Kong.²⁴ One of the leaders of the Patriot Alliance Association of Taiwan, which advocates integration with China and occasionally uses dirty tricks such as pressuring the police to share the list of pro-independence actors, admitted that the Association received financial support from China. China

¹⁸ Bruce Ping-kuen Lui, "Hong Kong's Media under China's Sharp Power," in *China's sharp power in Hong Kong*, ed. Benny Yiu-ting Tai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Civil Hub, 2018), 54.

¹⁹ Samuel Wade, "Thousands Protest Chinese Media Influence in Taipei," *China Digital Times*, 25 June 2019.

²⁰ "Red Infiltration: Taiwan's 23 Network Media copy Chinese Official Media in Simplified Characters, All Criticizing Tsai Ing-wen, Methods of Figures behind the Scene" [in Chinese], *Apple Daily* (Taiwan), 12 July 2019.

²¹ Sang Pu, "Crippled Electoral System of Hong Kong," in *China's sharp power in Hong Kong*, ed. Benny Yiu-ting Tai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Civil Hub, 2018), 40-41.

²² Ellie Ng, "Man Jailed for Four Years for Bribing Localists to Rig District Elections," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 26 October 2016.

²³ Pu, op. cit., 42.

²⁴ Ibid., 47.

uses the Straits Exchange Foundation of Taiwan to provide local politicians with trips to China to co-opt them. The Chinese proxies in Taiwan have been investing in local infrastructure to support Kuomintang politicians in their districts.²⁵

In addition to its actions in Hong Kong and Taiwan, China has been spreading narratives throughout Asia that are favourable not only to China itself but also to authoritarianism in general, and that are damaging to democratic norms, through various channels such as Confucius Institute and China Central Television.²⁶ And, as well as this expansion in the group of target countries subject to the use of sharp power detrimental to democracy, the ranks of sharp power actors are also on the increase, which further poses a grave danger to democracy. While in their seminal report in 2017 the National Endowment for Democracy and International Forum for Democratic Studies found China and Russia to be the actors using sharp power,²⁷ by 2019 the list had expanded to include India, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela.²⁸

EVOLUTION OF IT

The evolution of IT has helped promote democracy. IT has supported the dissemination of information necessary to check governments, the communication and networking among pro-democracy actors, and the mobilisation of people for democratisation movements. The Arab Spring was considered as a showcase, where people were mobilised through SMS.

On the other hand, IT has also made the manipulation of the public and the suppression of unwanted voices much easier, both domestically and internationally. State surveillance using facial recognition is a powerful tool. The Hong Kong government enacted the anti-mask law in October 2019 because masks prevent facial recognition through artificial intelligence (AI), although demonstrators continued wearing masks in protest and the High Court struck down the law. Each government

²⁵ Matsumoto, *op. cit.*, 25-26.

²⁶ See, for example, Motoko Shuto, "Patterns and Views of China's Public Diplomacy in ASEAN Countries: Focusing on Confucius Institutes," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 7, no. 2 (2018), 124-148.

²⁷ National Endowment for Democracy and International Forum for Democratic Studies, "Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence," December 2017.

²⁸ Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation," The Computational Propaganda Project, Oxford Internet Institute and the University of Oxford, 27 September 2019.

tends to learn from other governments' methods of repression, and according to Amnesty International, this tendency is the clearest in state surveillance.²⁹ Thus, other Asian countries are also moving towards the introduction of facial recognition. Singapore introduced the technology in 2018, and the Indian government is preparing for its introduction across the country. The state of Penang in Malaysia also introduced a facial recognition system in 2019. Individual locations and events such as airports, banks, police stations, convenience stores, sporting events, and concert halls are increasingly using facial recognition. Targeted surveillance has been on the increase as well, and the Bangladeshi and Thai governments passed cyber security laws that allow the governments to access data on the Internet in November 2018 and February 2019, respectively, which could be used to silence critical voices to the government and restrict the freedom of expression.

Domestic actors also engage in online influence campaigns to mobilise support and smear opponents. According to Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, various types of domestic actors, including government agencies, politicians and political parties, private contractors, civil society organisations and individual influencers, engage in manipulation campaigns online.³⁰ In India, both the governing party BJP and a major opposition party, the Indian National Congress party, are said to possess IT cells that use bots and trolls for the spread of disinformation.³¹ In the 2019 presidential election in Indonesia, a massive volume of disinformation was spread from both the Joko Widodo and the Prabowo Subianto camps. Civil society actors also supported the Indonesian election campaigns with the use of IT, and groups such as Rumah Bersama Pelayan Rakyat voluntarily analysed big data on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram with AI, on behalf of Joko Widodo.³² There are said to be hundreds of troll farms in the Philippines, and the country serves as one of the hubs of the global trolling industry for political campaigns.³³ Among Asian countries, Myanmar and Vietnam, in addition to China, are said to possess high cyber troop capacity, with significant staff and funding, and Cambodia, India,

²⁹ Amnesty International, "Ending the Targeted Digital Surveillance of Those Who Defend Our Rights," ACT 30/1385/2019 (2019), 6.

³⁰ Bradshaw and Howard, op. cit.

³¹ Ualan Campbell-Smith and Samantha Bradshaw, "Global Cyber Troops Country Profile: India," Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford (November 2019).

³² Masaaki Okamoto, "Beginning of Politics in the Post-Truth Era: Big Data and AI" [in Japanese], *IDE Square*, July 2019.

³³ Shibani Mahtani and Regine Cabato, "Why Crafty Internet Trolls in the Philippines May Be Coming to a Website near You," *The Washington Post*, 25 July 2019.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, and Uzbekistan are said to possess medium cyber troop capacity.³⁴

The evolution of information technology increases the likelihood of external actors' intrusion with sharp power as well. At the time of the unofficial e-referendum on the desirability of direct ballot for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in June 2014, *Apple Daily* and *PopVote*, two newspapers which co-hosted the e-referendum together with the University of Hong Kong, became the subject of massive and advanced cyber attacks.³⁵ In the 2019 demonstrations, the messaging app Telegram, which was used by the demonstrators, and the Internet platform "LIHKG", which was used for mobilisation of demonstrators, were subjected to massive DDoS attacks. According to Telegram CEO Pavel Durov, the attacks were mainly from IP addresses within China.³⁶ AT&T Cybersecurity points out that China's cyber-attack system, Great Cannon, which sends malicious JavaScript files to transmit massive garbage requests to target websites in order to hijack communications, was used.³⁷ China is also said to have conducted massive cyber attacks on governmental organisations such as the National Election Commission, opposition politicians, and activists at the time of the general election in Cambodia in 2018.³⁸

Both domestic and international actors attack opponents online with the use of IT, distorting reality and causing chaos in democratic societies. Such methods are utilised to legitimise domestic authoritarian leaders, lower the hurdle for bypassing democratic institutions, and manipulate the international perception in favour of China. Chaos in democratic societies weakens public trust in democracy as well, thereby further damaging democratic norms.

³⁴ Bradshaw and Howard, op. cit., 18-20.

³⁵ Joyu Wang, "Cyber Attacks Hit Pro-Democracy Websites in Hong Kong," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2014; Paul Mozur and Chester Yung, "Hong Kong Democracy Poll Hit by Cyberattack," *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 June 2014.

³⁶ Rachel Siegel, "Telegram Hit by Massive Chinese Cyberattack During Hong Kong Protests," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2019; Shelly Banjo, "Hong Kong Cyber Attack Briefly Disrupts Key Protester Forum," *Bloomberg*, 30 August 2019.

³⁷ Chris Doman, "The "Great Cannon" Has Been Deployed Again," *AT&T Cybersecurity*, 4 December 2019.

³⁸ Scott Henderson, Steve Miller, Dan Perez, Marcin Siedlarz, Ben Wilson, and Ben Read, "Chinese Espionage Group TEMP.Periscope Targets Cambodia Ahead of July 2018 Elections and Reveals Broad Operations Globally," *FireEye*, 11 July 2018.

CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the spread of challenges to democracy across borders, will democracies die out? Pro-democracy protests show that democracy supporters do not easily surrender when deprived of freedom and dignity. Hongkongers have repeatedly taken to the streets to call for freedom, human rights, and democracy since the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. Even in the face of police arrests and court sentencing, they have never given up. The year 2019 alone showed that the same can be said of other places as well. Sharing the sense of danger with Hongkongers, people in Taiwan have become vocal about their opposition to Chinese intervention, organising rally after rally against Chinese influence. Students in Indonesia took to the streets, protesting the significant weakening of the Corruption Eradication Commission. Indians have mobilised large crowds, protesting the anti-Muslim citizenship law, in a number of cities.

Hopes and voices for freedom and dignity can be powerful enough to lead to democratic transition from authoritarian rule. The Malaysian people brought about the historical change in administration in 2018, in a manifestation of their hopes to terminate corruption and to have the country governed democratically. People in South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia fought against authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, never relinquishing the fight for democracy. Pro-democracy movements continue until goals are attained, because the actors know that they are the ones on the side of justice.

Claiming that democratisation must occur spontaneously, Asian governments have upheld the principle of non-interference and shied away from criticising other governments' attempts to weaken democratic values domestically and internationally. They have to be aware, however, that such silence helps weaken democratic values and suppress citizens calling for democracy. Furthermore, due to the interconnectedness of the challenges to democracy, both among themselves and across borders, democratic recession in a country will impact other countries seriously.

Governments that face pro-democracy movements domestically should engage in constructive talks with pro-democracy actors and make concessions. Other Asian governments should not rely on the principle of non-interference and should issue statements and take appropriate measures for the support of dignity and lives of the people in Asian societies. They must realise that the existence of citizens calling for democracy is a manifestation of the spontaneous voice for it. Without supporting such citizens, there is no way to bring stability, peace, and dignity to Asia.

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